

GOVERNING CLIMATE CHANGE: THEORY AND PRACTICE



SYLLABUS

VU Amsterdam Summer School

6-17 July 2026

Any general questions for the Summer
School support team? Contact
amsterdamsummerschool@vu.nl.



Course Details

Title	Governing Climate Change: Theory and Practice
Coordinator(s)	• Prof. Philipp Pattberg, Institute for Environmental Studies • Dr. Oscar Widerberg, Institute for Environmental Studies
Other lecturers	• Dr. Bruna Bosi Moreira • Dr. Mathieu Blondeel • Dr. Ina Lehmann
Study credits	3 ECTS
Form(s) of tuition	• On campus, lectures, workshops, simulations • Fields trips (Brussels and Amsterdam)
Approximate contact hours	45
Approximate self-study hours	39

Teaching staff (in order of appearance)

- Prof. Philipp Pattberg
- Dr. Oscar Widerberg

Course description

We are in the middle of a climate breakdown. Climate change is the most pressing environmental challenge facing humankind. Yet despite scientific consensus on its main cause – human activities – politicians and governments still lack the will and ambition to tackle the crisis effectively. Instead we see cities, companies and NGOs responding. They have become the driving forces behind innovative tools for behavioral change, creating a complex alternative web of institutions, instruments and actors seeking to govern climate change at the global level. However, these bottom-up initiatives are often criticized as green-washing while at the same time fossil fuel interests control the political process.

In this course you examine different approaches to coping with climate change, from international agreements to climate actions by companies, cities and individual citizens. Each week, we delve into different topics and challenges, ranging from the history of climate change governance, climate and conflict, energy transition, and geopolitics, to how we adapt to perhaps irreversible climate-induced effects in an equitable way. We also critically engage with questions around justice, responsibility and accountability for and in the climate crisis. Theory is mixed with practice throughout a set of interactive lectures, where discussions, games and excursions are used to provide concrete examples of how the issue is being

addressed at various levels and by various actors. Along the way we invite you to question scientists, policymakers and lobbyists.

A more concrete overview of the themes we engage with during the course is provided below in the course schedule.

Learning objectives

After completing this course, students will be able to:

- Understand how global climate governance has changed over the past 40 years and where it might take us in the future;
- Critically examine and assess current climate governance in terms of its emergence, effectiveness and efficiency, and be able to formulate reasoned opinions about contested concepts like fairness, legitimacy, equity and justice;
- Adequately communicate and debate about climate change issues, and;
- Understand practical local and global solutions to climate change, partly based on in-person observations of solutions applied in the Netherlands.

Assignments and Assessment

There are three types of assessments in this course:

- A short written essay (course assignment) of 1000 words discussing the pros and cons of (1) the Paris Agreement, (2) emission trading and carbon pricing or (3) cities and climate change (50% of the grade)
- A short oral presentation of individual/group course assignment, where the student develops their own climate action initiative (20% of the grade)
- Attendance and active participation in class and in negotiation simulation (30% of the grade)

Provisional reading list

All readings indicated as “required” shall be read and studied before the respective class. As a general rule, taking notes of the core argument and key facts is a good way to prepare for the lecture and class discussion (which is actively encouraged).

Class	Topic	Readings
1	Introduction: the climate change challenge; the governance challenge	IPCC (2018). Summary for Policymakers. https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf

2	Climate Science and controversies	Hulme, M. (2010). Climate change: What do we know about the IPCC? <i>Progress in Physical Geography</i>, 34(5): 705-718. http://ppg.sagepub.com/content/34/5/705 Boykoff, M. (2008). The cultural politics of climate change discourse in UK tabloids. <i>Political Geography</i>, 27(5): 549-569. http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/admin/publication_files/source-2741-2008.27.pdf
3	The history and structure of international climate governance	Pattberg, P. and O. Widerberg (2017). The climate change regime. https://www.dropbox.com/s/fq7rwy8zpct7cvl/Oxford%20Encyclopedia%20Climate%20Change%20Summer%20school.pdf?dl=0 Pattberg, P., Kaiser, C., Widerberg, O. et al. 20 Years of global climate change governance research: taking stock and moving forward. <i>Int Environ Agreements</i> (2022). https://doi-org.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10784-022-09568-5
4	Contemporary climate governance: From Copenhagen to Paris	Falkner, R. (2016) The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-2346.12708/full Is the Paris Agreement effective? A systematic map of the evidence - IOPscience
5	Global Energy Politics	Blondeel, M., Bradshaw, M. J., Bridge, G., & Kuzemko, C. (2021). The geopolitics of energy system transformation: A review. <i>Geography Compass</i>, e12580. https://compass-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/share/4V3K3VGMVNYN2ICQQQYZ?target=10.1111/gec3.12580 Blondeel, Mathieu, and Michael Bradshaw. 2022. 'Managing Transition Risk: Toward an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Strategies in the Oil Industry'. <i>Energy Research & Social Science</i> 91 (September): 102696. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102696
6	Simulation: International climate negotiation	Reading material will be provided during the week on Canvas.

7	Climate governance by the European Union	Rayner, T., Szulecki, K., Jordan, A.J. and Oberthür, S., 2023. The global importance of EU climate policy: an introduction. In Handbook on European Union climate change policy and politics (pp. 1-21). Edward Elgar Publishing. Sufficient to read pages 1-12 https://www.elgaronline.com/downloadpdf/edcollchap-0a/book/9781789906981/book-part-9781789906981-11.pdf YouTube video: The EU explained. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFeB9fMGJ9k
8	Climate governance by the VU and campus tour	No readings
9 and 10	Climate change adaptation	Cohen-Shacham, E., G. Walters, C. Janzen, and S. Maginnis, eds. (2016). <i>Nature-Based Solutions to Address Global Societal Challenges</i>. IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature. Chapters 1 & 2 https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2016-036.pdf
11	Climate change and conflict	On canvas
12	Transformative change 1 and 2	On canvas

Course Schedule

Week 1: 6-10 July

Day	Hours	Teacher	Class number, subject	Assessment/task
Monday <i>6 July</i>	10:00-12:30	Pattberg, Widerberg	1. Introduction: the climate change challenge; the governance challenge	Study required literature
	13:30-15:00	Pattberg	2. Climate change controversies	Study required literature
Tuesday <i>7 July</i>	10:00-12:30	Pattberg	3. The history and structure of international climate governance	Study required literature
	13:30-16:00	Pattberg	4. Contemporary climate governance: The Paris Agreement	Study required literature
Wednesday <i>8 July</i>	10:00-12:30	Blondeel	5. Global Energy Transition and Geopolitics	Study required literature
	14:00-17:00	VU social program		
Thursday <i>9 July</i>	10:00-17:00	Pattberg, Widerberg	6. Simulation: International climate negotiations	Prepare according to material; see Canvas
Friday <i>10 July</i>	10:00-12:00	Bosi Moreira	7. Climate governance by the European Union	Study required literature
	13:00-15:00	Pattberg	8. Climate governance by the VU and campus tour	No literature

Week 2: 13-17 July

Day	Hours	Teacher	Class number, subject	Assessment/Task
Monday 13 July	07:00 – 20:30	Excursion to Brussels, European Parliament and a Political party		
Tuesday 14 July	10:00-12:30	Pattberg	9. Climate adaptation	Study required literature
	13:30-16:00	Lehmann	10. Climate justice	Study required literature
Wednesday 15 July	10:00-12:00	Widerberg	11. Climate and conflict	Study required literature
	14:00-17:00	VU social program		
Thursday 16 July	10:00-12:30	Pattberg Widerberg	12. Transformative change I	Study required literature
	13:30-17:00	Pattberg, Widerberg	13. Transformative change II (innovation)	In the Ceuvel
Friday 17 July	10:00-13:00	Widerberg	14. Student presentations	Present your own climate initiative
	14:00-15:00	Widerberg	15. Wrap-up	
	15:15-17:30	Farewell drinks (VU)		

Class Topics

Class	Topic	Key words	Learning objectives	Outline
1	The climate change problem; the governance challenge	anthropogenic climate change, atmosphere, carbon dioxide, climate system, climate sensitivity, climate variability, detection and attribution, Equivalent carbon dioxide (CO ₂) concentration, Equivalent carbon dioxide (CO ₂) emission, global warming potential, greenhouse effect, sea level change, uncertainty	• Articulate their own doubts, queries, and ideas about the climate change issue; • Explain the key causes of climate change; • Explain the key impacts of climate change; • Explain the challenge in attributing weather changes to greenhouse gas emissions.	The lecture describes the state of the art of the current knowledge about the climate change problem, its causes and impacts. It explains the key scientific findings and controversies. It discusses how science in the area of climate change is assessed. It explains how science and policy interact. It outlines the governance challenge of climate change
2	Climate change science and controversies	Scepticism; climate denial; InterGovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); climate science	• To understand the main controversies between the IPCC and the skeptics on climate change; • To be able to integrate the information to prepare arguments for and against the existence of the climate change problem.	The lecture describes the current state of knowledge about anthropogenic climate change and addresses a number of frequently heard criticisms by so-called climate skeptics.
3	The history and structure of international climate governance	UNFCCC; Kyoto; coalitions, issue-linkages, interests, position, leadership	• Describe and understand the interests of different actors in the negotiating process; • Explain the role of leadership in addressing the problem of climate change; • Understand and analyze how coalitions form between actors and how this can address the problem at national to global level; • Understand and analyze how issue-linkages are used by different actors to gain consensus in issues.	This lecture describes (a) the political context of the climate change negotiations; (b) the current international regime; (c) the positions of countries and coalitions of countries; and (d) the non- state actors in the regime and their perspectives. It shows the relationship between politics at local through to global level. It also shows the changing paradigms underlying solutions to the climate change problem.

4	Contemporary climate governance: From Copenhagen to Paris	bottom-up and top-down approach; failure of Copenhagen; Copenhagen Accord; 2015 Paris Agreement; new coalitions; increasing relevance of non-state climate governance	- Identify and explain the major structural shift from a top-down to a bottom-up regime; - Understand the role of private actors in addressing the problem of climate change; - Understand and analyze how coalitions form between actors.	This lecture describes the failure of the Copenhagen summit (COP 15) and the ensuing shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach that resulted in the 2015 Paris Agreement. We will also cover recent developments related to Paris and assess its effectiveness to date.
5	Global Energy Transition and Geopolitics	Geopolitics; fossil fuels; oil; fossil fuel companies; conflict	TBD	TBD
6	Simulation: International climate negotiations	UNFCCC; negotiation theory	- Understand the difficulties of negotiating climate change in a multilateral setting; - Engage in solution-based learning.	This class will feature a full day simulation of an UNFCCC negotiation.
7	Climate governance by the European Union	European Union; institutions; ETS	- Understand the role and relevance of the European Union in governing climate change. - Understand the key institutions of the European Union	This class prepares students for the excursion to the EU institutions on the week after. It explains the key institutions and policy instruments used by the EU to govern climate change.
8	Climate governance by the VU and campus tour	Universities; VU; fossil free VU	- Understand the role of Universities in mitigating climate change - Describe the actions taken by the VU to address climate change - Critically discusses the potentials and challenges for universities to address climate change	This class provides an overview of the VU's work to cut ties with the fossil fuel industry, and includes a campus tour to showcase various sustainability initiatives taken by the University.
9 & 10	Climate change adaptation and Justice 1 & 2	Adaptation; biodiversity, environmental justice	- Understand the concepts of adaptation, adaptive governance and resilience and vulnerability in relation to climate change; - Understand concrete climate related adaptation policies; - Critically assess the associated problems and	This class discussed the available policy options in climate change governance and politics related to adaptation. It focuses on the ideas of adaptive governance and resilience to understand the challenges related to adaptation policies at various levels.

			challenges of societal adaptation.	Concrete topics will include adaptation funding, adaptation projects and national plans.
11	Climate and conflict	War; climate migration; carbon emissions by military	• Understand how climate change affects and is affected by conflict • Analyze the role of the military in fossil fuel emission • Critically discuss the influence of climate change on migration	In this class, we discuss how climate change affects and is affected by recent geopolitical events, including conflicts and war, as well as migration flows. It also contains an overview of the relationship between the military and greenhouse gas emissions.
12 & 13	Transformative change	transition theory; transformation; institutional and organizational change; individual vs collective action	• Investigate the various options, at individual and collective levels, to instigate deep and transformative change (as opposed to shallow and cosmetic change).	This class investigates how we can individually and collectively move towards deep system transformation, but also discusses the obstacles that are in the way (e.g. fossil fuel interests and their influence on decision-making). We also make an excursion to the Cevuel, a creative hub in Amsterdam North.

